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ABSTRACT

The accomplishments of the York International Conference on the Teaching and Learning of English held in 1971 are presented as the work of six commissions made up of conference participants. The participants were 100 Americans; 100 Canadians, and 250 British. Commission One addressed itself to English in the secondary school, ages 11-18; Commission Two had as its task the exploration of various non-exclusive means of planning and organizing English programs; the topic of Commission Three was "Language and Learning in the Primary School"; Commission Four considered the topic "English for the Young Adult," ages 16-22; Commission Five concentrated specifically on the place of drama in the teaching and learning of English; and the issue of curriculum change was attacked by Commission Six. A spontaneous Seventh Commission addressed themselves to the issues of the power and role of English teachers as rational political activities, of professional organizations, the redefinition of the responsibility of those organizations to teachers, and to the protection and encouragement of responsible innovation. (DB)

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YORK: THE SUMMER OF OUR CONTENT
PROLOGUE OR EPILOGUE

by B.E. BITNER

There was electricity in the air at the outset of the York International Conference on the Teaching and Learning of English. A kind of "surely some revelation is at hand, surely the Second Coming is at hand" electricity. Many of the 450 American, Canadian, and British participants anticipated the sort of revolutionary "shocking" voltage that was generated in some quarters five years ago by the Dartmouth Seminar. York Conference planners from the NCTE, the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, the British National Association of Teachers of English, and the Modern Language Association and the participants from the three countries recognized, in some cases grudgingly, that a very different sort of voltage must be generated by a large, diverse group meeting for a week than by fifty specialists from two countries closeted for a month. Still there were cherished expectations of scintillating discussion, world-wide impact, rational-radical change, fantastic but practical schemata, and nitty-gritty problem solving. These expectations were not altogether frustrated by the reality of the conference, though the impact of York 1971 will probably be more on the order of evolution than revolution.

As to the mechanics of the conference . . . So that there might be a variety of access points from which to approach the central issues concerning English educators in 1971, the participants — rounded off to 100 Americans, 100 Canadians, 250 British — chose in advance one of six commissions to join for the week. Each of the six was lead-off and organized by one British chairman, one American and one Canadian co-chairman. Although they were autonomous in matters of organization, topic, and approach to topic, each of the commissions provided for large group sessions on the central topic and small, work-group sessions of specific concern within the framework of that topic.

Commission One, perhaps the most encompassing of the commissions, addressed itself to English in the secondary school, ages 11 — 18. Four issues were central to the work of this commission:

1. how conditions for teaching and learning English are

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affected by the values of a school and the way it functions

2. the manner in which an English department operates

3. the role and influence of outside agencies on the teaching of English

4. the advisability or inadvisability of an agreed language policy across the school

The role of heads of department, methods of structuring English programs, syllabuses, materials, team-teaching, building-layout, processes of assessment, the influence of administrators, the impact of media, student sub-cultures and value systems, inservice training and teacher preparation, and awareness of and use of language by teachers were specific concerns for the six sub-groups. Each of these items of discussion was raised and examined in its relationship to the inescapable if unanswerable questions: What does it mean to teach or learn English? What should we be doing when we teach or learn English?

The Second Commission, which organized itself into five working groups, was titled "Chance, Choice or Program" and had as its task the exploration of various non-exclusive means of planning and organizing English programs. The groups considered the influence of the school's sub-culture(s) on teaching and learning activities, the teacher-initiated thematic approach, the teacher-initiated theme which the students take in any direction they choose, pupil-initiated work, the sub-division of English programs according to materials and the teacher's objectives, and the detailed, pre-planned curriculum as possible methods of program organization. These methods were viewed with the aim of determining which approaches were appropriate under certain circumstances and how they might be combined or alternated for greatest effectiveness.

"Language and Learning in the Primary School" was the topic of Commission Three. School visitations in the York area, and films and tapes of primary classrooms provided members of this commission with common stepping-off points for their discussion. American teachers had heard so much about the openness and flexibility of British primary schools that preliminary discussions had to be directed to international differences in the connotative meanings of terms such as 'progressive' and 'open' and clarification of what similarities and

differences in reality exist between North American and British primary language programs. Specific tasks of small groups in Commission Three were to analyze the situation of the younger child in school, the process and content of and response to reading, drama and language, the nature and purpose of children's writing, and children's literature.

In considering the topic "English for the Young Adult", ages 16 — 22, Commission Four dealt with various school projects and programs that have been designed to meet the needs of the college-bound and in-college student of English. The study of various projects in current use led to discussion of possible approaches to literary studies and writing, the kinds of learning these approaches imply and the kinds of teaching they require. Participants were also concerned with various specialist studies such as writing, audio-visual work, literary criticism, drama, and language studies and with the demands these place on the learner and the teacher as different from the demands made by a general English program.

Participants in Commission Five concentrated specifically on the place of drama in the teaching and learning of English. Actual experience in improvisation and role-playing at the start of the week gave them practical foundations for studying the types of drama, methods of using drama in the classroom, and the relationship of drama to literature and language activities.

The issue of curriculum change was attacked by six small groups in Commission Six. Each group addressed itself to a central question. How and to what extent can one define objectives for curriculum change? By what means and criteria can curriculum material be evaluated? What effect do growth models of children's development have on planning an English curriculum? By what means can teachers be encouraged and assisted to become effective designers and users of curricula? How can a new curriculum be assessed? What is the relationship between public opinion and curriculum change?

One of the inherent difficulties of the multiple commission organization of the York Conference was that lack of time prohibited any immediate, in-depth sharing between commissions about the work that each was doing. The exclusiveness of closed groups was counteracted somewhat, however, by daily open sessions during which three or four programs — for example, tapes of London schools, drama workshops, films, presentations of students' work — were offered simultaneously, giving members of one

commission the occasion to view material being used by another. Some inter-group continuity was provided by roving specialists and conference planners who visited at random or on request the small groups and large sessions, assisting the workers with their expertise and cross-pollinating useful or related issues from one commission or small group to another.

Finally, it was the participants themselves who prevented a separatist situation. Publishers, professors, teacher educators, heads of departments, new and experienced teachers were all consummately concerned with the nature of their responsibility to students of English in 1971. The topics of separate commissions, the tasks of small groups were different avenues of approach to this paramount conference concern.

A sigh and a patronizing "Is there nothing new in English conferences anymore?" would be understandable at this point. There is little about these organizational bare bones of the York International Conference to distinguish it from other English conferences. Many of the participants themselves felt something less than electric at mid-week, were closer to despair of getting recognizable work done than to feeling revelation was at hand. Early conference episodes of soul-baring, crutch-snatching, ax-grinding, dead-horse beating and term defining had shortened tempers and patience. By week's end, however, conference members were recharged, a good deal of specific ground was explored and several important areas of mutual concern and agreement became apparent.

At one level, York 1971 may be commended for the issues it did not raise, the attitudes it did not foster. For Americans, perhaps more than for the Canadians or British, the experiences of recent years have crystalized into a vague fear of "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . . The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." The time is characterized by extremes, English education *seems* to be polarized into irreconcilable either/or propositions. The York Conference was unique in that the participants refused to promulgate extreme attitudes and throughout strove to strike a sensitive, rational, working balance between polar possibilities. Few if any pleas were honored, even heard, for doing away with schools or for glorifying them, for pupil power or for teacher power, for book burning or for TV smashing, for total freedom or for rigid restriction.

One of the concerns of many participants was to make it clear that, though some English classes, some schools operate fully

on the fringes of an extreme, there is a felt need for Golden Mean-ing. They saw as one of their responsibilities, that of beginning to move themselves and each other toward that mean. In important ways they accomplshed that task. One of the topical concerns was that of freedom or restraint, non-structure or imposed structure, open or closed classrooms. There were those present who had experienced and favored the radical chic sort of open education and those who, viewing it with cynic eye, had maintained a more restrictive stance toward students and curriculum. To members of both persuasions, the inadequacy of their mutually exclusive approaches became apparent; they began to work together to map out the ground between, where lay effective combinations of the best aspects of both approaches. Having gained this significant ground, they recognized the need now to move with a new sense of caution from such theoretical agreement to practical applications of this sort of Golden Mean in the classroom. What is crucial is that the seeming Paradises of both pure progressive and pure traditional approaches to English teaching and learning were found lacking, were recognized as untenable poles between which lies a definable middle ground.

For Americans at the York Conference, the rudest awakening may well have been their confrontation with British usage of the word 'language'. Most Americans perceived 'language' as a term naming that portion of an English program, exclusive in some fashion of composition and literature, under which are subsumed grammar, usage, lexicography, vocabulary, and perhaps spelling and language history. For the British, this is a limited and dangerous perception of the word, a concept of language that has frustrated attempts to define the purpose and aims of English teaching and learning. It took nearly the week for many Americans to arrive at an understanding of the British concentration on language; very few of those who arrived at that understanding were unchanged by it.

If one adopts the view, widely held by the British, that the symbol system of language is used by agreement of a community of people to internalize and to communicate experience, then all of the activities common to English classrooms — composition, discussion, reading — are aspects of that symbol system. Literature *is* a culture-bearer and often a humanizer, but more specifically it is one mode of the language symbol system, created by language manipulators, interpreted and internalized by other language manipulators. Writing *is* a useful skill and a mental discipline, but more

importantly it is another mode of language manipulated with varying degrees of consciousness and skill by a language user to influence, convince, or share with another language user or simply to express personal experience. Talk, until recently the poor relation to writing and reading, is a complex manipulation of language that has as many aspects as there are people to talk to and things to talk about.

Too often, by viewing literature, composition and language as only vaguely related items on the English agenda, English teachers have missed opportunities to expand and develop students' language awareness and facility. This separate handling of literature and writing leads, for example, to the confusion in students' minds about the bearing of, perhaps, Steinbeck's novels or Art Simon's lyrics on their own efforts to communicate, and in some measure explains their subsequent rejection of certain English tasks as irrelevant. Too often, influential aspects of the students' real-world language environment — commercials, student body protests, family arguments, sub-culture idiom and slang — have been ignored in the vague hope that they would 'go away' or be somehow outweighed by English-class-type languaging activities. The wily students have recognized the choice being put to them and have often instinctively chosen the influence of these other communicants over the influence of the English teacher. In the name of progressive, relevant English teaching, some of these real-world language activities have been welcomed willy-nilly and without conscious objective analysis by students or teachers into the classroom. In either case, the variety of types of language exposure and languaging experience have been limited. The students pay the consequences of these limitations.

American, Canadian, and British participants, having arrived at a workable understanding of the pervasive meanings of 'language' and facing up to the errors they had committed previous to this understanding, were sobered by the monumental task of fitting out students to cope with their total and complex language environment. By what means can English teachers determine the language needs of students? On what theoretical basis can an English teacher organize his program so that the most effective language activities are made available, the most conducive language environment is created?

Work done by men such as John Dixon, Jean Piaget, Andrew Wilkinson, M.A.K. Halliday and James Moffat on growth and communications models, evidences the possibility of determining

certain normative patterns of personal and language growth, patterns that will be common in many children. Individual students will move at different rates through various identifiable and generally sequential stages of these developmental patterns. Conference participants recognized that no clear judgment could be made as to whether development determines advisable classroom language activities or, conversely, whether activities will bring about development. An English program structured around the patterns suggested by growth and communications models would of necessity be open to both possibilities. In any case, growth/communications models were seen to be a realistic, workable aid to understanding and ordering the language experiences of students and a useful means of examining and improving the classroom language environment.

Certainly many of the participants in the conference became more conscious of the nature of the language demands they place on students, of the need to relate the frequency, scope, sequence and type of classroom language activities to objective. rational developmental patterns and of the need to ask new pertinent questions in light of their recognition of language as the key to English programs. What, if any, language activities are inappropriate to the English classroom? How can the classroom be structured to allow for individual growth? Should language be evaluated by criteria of correctness or effectiveness? Is there any content or subject matter that is inappropriate to English if language deals with all content and subject matters? Can one, should one, evaluate personal language? What activities will best encourage growth in a particular language ability? For many Americans, this confrontation with 'language' may well have been the "revelation at hand" that they anticipated.

Another issue of quite different dimensions caused sparks to fly at York. Early in the week an extra edition of the daily news letter voiced the concern of three British participants over the social and political implications of English teaching. The influence of social change, cultural attitudes, racial and class distinctions on education was a 'given' in nearly all discussion at the conference. However, the newsletter brought this unspoken concern sharply and unavoidably into the spotlight. Politics and the school, politicians and institutions as anti-progressives, society as a force to contend with and the denial of the relevance of any or all of these became immediate conversational staples. The political/social beast moved rapidly into an open forum session for the airing of griefs and the exchanging of viewpoints. Those who were satisfied with grief-

airing and viewpoint-trading departed, leaving a core of concerned to establish a spontaneous Seventh Commission. They addressed themselves in subsequent sessions to the issues of the power and role of English teachers as rational political activists, the power and role of professional organizations, the redefinition of the responsibility of those organizations to teachers and to the protection and encouragement of responsible innovation. They were entirely conscious of the enormity of their task and the invisibility of the "enemy", but laid the groundwork for continuing their work after the conference.

It was significant that the issues raised by the Seventh Commission reminded many that they do not, regretably perhaps, teach in a vacuum, nor do their students come to them unformed, *tabula-rasa* style, nor could any of the work at the conference be done without at least semi-conscious recognition of social implications and influences. Many who did not join the Seventh Commission sympathized with the issues, but held the quiet hope that by doing their job effectively, toward which end the conference was held, they could exert the most influence on society. Nevertheless, these re-cognitions colored the workings of the remainder of the week and may have been the jolt that dispelled mid-week frustration and despair of accomplishment.

There is perhaps an air of the ideal, the lofty, the general about all of this. The post-conference aura of breathless satisfaction clouds disagreeable specifics. There *were* moments of intense discomfort and of disagreement at York. Literature for its own sake had its day. Members from the encampments of the content-centered and the student-centered programs had their sparring matches. Cries of 'radical' and of 'conservative' could be heard in the distance. Moments of personal discomfort and professional ire were made visual in poems, pleas, questions tacked on bulletin boards. Classroom teachers suffered pangs of inadequacy in the shadow of roving experts. There were expressions of concern from classroom teachers over the distance between their work and the work of the theoreticians who, it was suggested, spoke in tongues. Some faces wore disgusted expressions that read "what a waste of time". A few, undoubtedly were totally silenced by the chance remarks of others. Others, to be certain, had a wonderful vacation including Hadrian's Wall and the York Conference.

On the positive side, it was truly remarkable to conference planners and participants alike that disagreements and differences of opinion were on a personal and professional level and only

infrequently on a national level. That people of three very different cultures, working in dissimilar educational and social environments, could so quickly overcome the problems of terminology and agree on questions to be asked, priorities to be assigned and often answers to be given, is an indication that anarchy has not prevailed in English education.

To the heart of the matter . . . there is, unquestionably a rough beast slouching off from York to be born. What rough beast is it? It is too large and too close in to be defined. To attempt definition would be to take on the task of the seven blind Indian gentlemen attempting to describe the entirety of an elephant by feeling one of its component parts. There will certainly be follow-up publications of one sort or another overviewing the implications of the conference as a whole and explaining the accomplishments/conclusions of specific groups on specific topics. There were tentative plans made for follow-up conferences on particular issues of concern. The primary impact of the conference, however, will be in the definition given to the rough beast by teachers returning to their scattered classrooms, by professors returning to their colleges and universities, and by researchers with new questions to answer. At present, there is little to be given to the classroom teachers who did not attend the conference in the way of 'how to' suggestions; cross-conference recommendations of this sort are and probably will be unavailable.

There is no need for despair, however. York does offer to the classroom teacher serious new attitudes of a more rational and balanced sort about the nature of the work he is doing. His job is, as he has known it to be, to feed the student who is hungry, though he may not know it, for every language experience he can claim. The student, as individual and as social animal, was though physically absent, present at every sub-group, large-group and open session of the York Conference. It is clear that: We can begin to define his needs according to useful models of development. We must grant him every opportunity for personal decision making and language acquisition. He can on many occasions explain his needs to us. Teachers must not limit his language horizons on the basis of personal methodological or content preferences. Teachers must not ignore the language and social forces outside the classroom. Popular and traditional extremes of approach to English teaching are inadequate to the students' needs.

The York Conference clarified some of the aims of English

teaching and learning. The next task is to go about the business of finding the best ways to implement those aims. The York Conference laid waste some of the debilitating extremes of aim and approach that have frustrated English teachers. The task now is to design approaches that stand on solid, undevisive ground. The York Conference delivered up a new beast. The task for all English educators is to define, describe its specific features.

The revolutionary impact of previous "This is it!" announcements about the nature of the English beast caused confusion, disagreement and division. There is reason to hope that after the early stages of evolution, the work begun at York will have more positive results. Soon it may be possible to say:

"Now is the winter of our discontent,
Made splendid summer by this sun of York."

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